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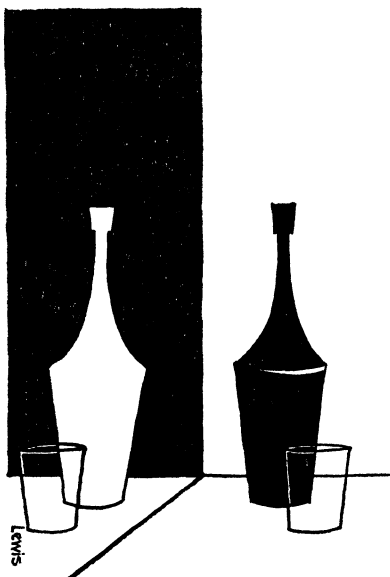
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Abstract

The cold glass of beer felt good in Mike's hand- a pleasant contrast to the stifling heat of the August night with the sidewalks still smoldering from burning beneath the sun...



Through a Glass, Darkly

by Gary Lewis

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known.

I Corinthians 13: 11, 12

THE COLD glass of beer felt good in Mike's hand — a pleasant contrast to the stifling heat of the August night with the sidewalks still smoldering from burning beneath the sun and the stale air of the office still trapped inside his chest. He had hoped the beer would ease the tangled confusion in his head that had left him exhausted, helpless and lonely for the past week. The beer had eased the heat, but left the jumbling of thoughts still haunting him. Eight o'clock. Mike looked across the narrow room to the clock glowing with a faint light in the darkness above the bar. It was just a simple joint — a bar with a long mirror opposite a few booths, a jukebox on one end, a toilet on the other, a

few flashes of neon on the walls and the dark solitude away from the street.

"Thought we'd never get those elevations finished for Peterson." Schuler's thin form, clutching a glass of beer, slid into the opposite side of the booth and settled back into the corner.

"Yeh, I noticed you guys still working when I left. It's past eight."

"The contractor has to have them tomorrow." A low, quiet voice from the corner of the booth — a narrow face topped with an uneven bush of colorless hair — dark, searching eyes behind heavy-rimmed glasses. Mike and Schuler had been buddies since freshman days at State. During the summer vacation, they worked at the same architectural firm. The past week, Schuler was the only one who could get along with Mike. Schuler was a good listener.

A shapeless mass moved in from the bar, sat down next to Schuler and ruptured the silence of the dark booth. "Christ, it's hot! Wish to hell it'd rain." The harsh gleam from the bar bounced from the damp forehead and from the folds of fat on Kelly's neck. August was especially bad for him; after eight hours over a drafting board, his shirt plastered itself between his shoulder blades, and dark stains seeped from beneath his arms.

"They say it's good for the farmers." Mike forced a grin across the booth to Kelly.

"To hell with the farmers! It's not good for me!" Kelly was a draftsman at the firm. His mouth tried to make up for his lack of intelligence.

Mike tried to ignore Kelly's invasion of the quiet booth. He let his fingers explore the smooth curve of the glass and felt the condensed moisture on the surface send needles of cold up his wrists. He glanced at Schuler and quickly looked back at the glass. "I may have to bunk with you for a few nights next week."

"You have to leave the apartment?"

"If we decide to let it go through — only married students can stay."

"You're not sure?" Schuler's face was only a pale blur behind his glasses in the dim light.

"She talked to a minister — wants to try it again." Mike

stared at his fingers toying with the glass. "But I don't think there's any other way."

Kelly slammed down his mug; the beer had left a ring of foam around his mouth. "Christ! You're crazy, man! You got something going for you and you don't even appreciate it."

"What do you mean?" An old fear was coming back. An old, almost forgotten fear — it twisted at his stomach and tightened across his chest.

"I mean someone footin' the bills through school, home-cooked meals, a little free lovin' anytime you need it. Man, you're crazy if you let *that* go!"

Now he knew; now he remembered. There were always ones like him before — the unfeeling, the unknowing, the big-mouthed bastards who spouted off and never listened and never cared.

"And think of her, too. You can't always think of yourself." Kelly's sweaty face gleamed in a smug expression of pious satisfaction as he accusingly pointed the beer glass. "Think of the years she's wasted on you. You have to think of her feelings, too, you know."

And now the preaching. Now the holy-big-mouth preaching. Know all the answers. Simple. Put it in the machine and grind — three and three make six as long as you're using apples. You couldn't fight them. Mike knew you couldn't fight them. He had no arguments ready, no quick comebacks, only the empty, tired knowledge that it was starting all over again. You never learn; you never change.

Schuler's voice became hard as it sliced out into the dark booth. "Knock it off, Kelly; you don't know anything about it."

"Aw, Christ, I was only tryin' to . . ."

"Don't sweat it, I said." Schuler's eyes left Kelly and searched Mike's face across the booth. "Just be sure, Mike. All you can do is try to be sure." The soft voice tried to reassure, tried to understand, tried to leap across the darkness which separates those who know and feel, from those who can only try.

Mike forced a shrug of his shoulders. "I'll work it out." He raised the glass to his lips and welcomed the slight burning pricks in his throat as he drew down large gulps of beer.

How many years? Ten? No, twelve. When he was twelve years old. There had been another time, other people, but they were all the same. All the same as now. . .

"Sure dark down here." Michael could barely see the steps leading down from the kitchen. His right foot slid over the top of each step until it found only empty air. Then, after a moment's hesitation, it plunged down to the next step. When he reached the bottom, he saw that the only light in the basement was the narrow stream of sunlight that stabbed in from the little window high above the floor. Last year's cobwebs covered the corners of the window and threw off sparkles of light as the sun passed through them. "Dusty, too." Michael reached out and swirled his hand through the glittering particles of dust that fell in slow motion through the beam of light. He squinted beyond the sunlight and could barely make out the faint outlines suggested in the darkness — the coal furnace next to a pile of cinders accumulated from the just-completed winter, a bicycle leaning against the wall, and a few boxes scattered in the corner. Just beyond the reach of the streaming sunlight, Michael could see the layers of shelves. Cans, jars of preserves, small boxes, old magazines and bits of other basement junk lined the shelves. "Should still be up there." By stretching on his tiptoes, Michael could reach the top shelf. "What's this?" He felt a pile of hard, flat objects with sharp corners. Pulling the pile down he saw that it was a group of framed pictures. "Grandma, Mom and Dad, Mom and Dad and me when I was little." Michael stared down at the smiling young couple holding a baby between them. "Kid stuff." He disgustedly piled the photographs back on the shelf and continued the search. Pushing through the cobwebs, he finally paused and pulled down a ragged and dusty ball glove. Stretching again, he groped his fingers through the dust until they felt the hard and battered surface of the baseball. "Knew they were here someplace." He blew the dust from the glove and traced a finger over the Joe DiMaggio signature incised in the leather. "Gotta get in shape." Michael flipped the ball into the pocket of the glove a few times and enjoyed the sharp stinging in the palm of his left hand. "Gotta work on my curve this year, too." He turned and started to run back up the stairs to the kitchen door.

A voice stopped him — a woman's voice behind the closed door at the top of the stairs. It was loud and angry and terrible and made Michael creep softly up the stairs and sit down next to the door. "So, you're going through with it!" It was Grandma's voice — but Grandma never came here. They went over there for Chirstmas, but she never visited here. She didn't like boys very well, and she made Michael sit on a chair all the while so he wouldn't dirty up the house. "I knew it would turn out this way!"

"I . . . I don't want to, but . . . there doesn't seem any other way . . ." His mom's voice sounded scared and different and like a little girl's.

"You have a twelve-year-old child to think about and you don't think there's any other way!" The voice lashed through the closed door and struck out at Michael. He drew his knees together and dug his elbows into his sides and clutched the glove and ball in his tight fists against his chest.

"But . . . he doesn't want . . . he doesn't want us anymore. We talked and argued and now . . . oh, what's the use? It's all over now."

"You wouldn't listen to me, would you? I told you . . ." Michael felt something twist at his stomach and tighten across his chest. He wanted to go up and stop Grandma from making Mom cry — but he couldn't. Shut-up, damn you! Leave her alone! But the sounds stuck in his throat and left only the sick feeling in his stomach. What are they fighting about? Why is Mom scared?

"Oh, Mother, please! Don't go into that again."

"Quit school and get married! Now a child to support! How will you support a child?"

"Please. Michael's home and he'll hear. I'm doing the only . . ."

"No, you wouldn't listen! You just wouldn't . . ." The harsh voice made Michael cringe as he huddled on the dark stairs. Why? Why don't I go up and hit her? She shouldn't talk to Mom that way. If Dad was here, he wouldn't let her do that to Mom.

The slamming of a door stopped the voices. "I came back to pick up my things. I won't be long." The man's voice was low and hard. Dad's home. It'll be O.K., now. Everything'll be O.K.

"Don't go yet. Please don't go." Mom was crying.

"Don't start whimpering again! We've been through this before. I'm fed up! Fed up with you, your kid, the whole mess!" The slamming of the door echoed through the quiet house as Michael crept down the steps to the basement floor. He slumped down on one of the scattered boxes and leaned his shoulders against the shelves. He sat alone in the dark — away from the voices, away from the crying, away from the dust sparkling in the sunlight streaming from the window high above the floor. Michael slammed the ball into the glove and let it sting his hand. The hurt felt good. He slammed again and again until his whole arm stung with the blows, and his whole body shook, and the jars rattled, and the picture of the smiling young couple with the baby fell from the top shelf and shattered into a million slivers of empty, dark glass.

The shattering of Mike's beer glass echoed throughout the dark stillness of time and broke into the quiet barroom.

"Christ, watchout what you're doin'!" Kelly pushed some of the broken fragments of glass with his foot away from his side of the booth.

"Sorry. Guess I was asleep." Mike tried to cover his shock with a sheepish smile.

"You just let it drop on the floor! I saw you!" Kelly's face was wrinkled in a puzzled expression — like a small boy who can't understand what is going on and is frightened by it.

"You O.K., Mike?" Schuler's anxious voice reached out from the corner of the booth.

"I'm O.K. Just an accident." The slivers of glass lay sparkling in the light from the bar, arranged in lines exploding in all directions from the point of impact on the dirty barroom floor. A small puddle of beer was splashed in the center of the shattered fragments. Mike could not pull his eyes away from the glittering composition in broken glass and beer. It's still glass. No matter how many years it lies there, no matter how many times you break it, no matter how small the slivers, it's still glass. Makes no difference how good it feels, it always falls and breaks into a million pieces.

And there's always tracks — everywhere you go — tracks. Try to learn, try to live a life over, try to walk across a snowy field without leaving tracks. You can't. There's no other way.

“You sure you're O.K., Mike?”

“Yeh. O.K. Hey, hey, let's bug out. I've got to get up tomorrow.”

“Christ, what about the floor?”

“Barkeep'll handle it. Let's go, Schuler.”

The two figures walked quickly across the narrow room and out into the dark street, leaving the “Christ it's hot” and “Good for the farmers” between Kelly and the barkeeper, and leaving the shattered glass lying in the beer and the dirt.

“Give you a lift, Mike?”

“Thanks, Schuler. Guess I'll walk tonight.”

“O.K., but mighty lonely — walking in the dark.”

Mike twisted one side of his mouth into a grin. “Lonely? Don't sweat it. I know the place very well. I've been there before.”

Autumn Image

by Theodore Kooser

The frost, in shadows remaining white
and gray, like catbird feathers cupped in leaves,
clings to the rustling grass where light
has strewn in shade its textural reprieves.